# CHAPTER VI

TOWARDS GREATNESS

W hen Gandhi landed at Durban, Natal, in May 1893, his

mission was simply to win a lawsuit, earn some money and

perhaps, at long last, start his career: ‘Try my luck in

South Africa/ he said. As he left the boat to meet his employer,

a Moslem business man named Dada Abdulla Sheth, Gandhi wore a

fashionable frock coat, pressed trousers, shining shoes and a

turban.

South African society was sharply divided by colour, class,

religion and profession, and each group jealously defended the

words and symbols which demarcated it from the others. English¬

men called all Indians ‘coolies’ or ‘samis’, and they referred to

‘coolie teachers’, ‘coolie merchants’, ‘coolie barristers’, etc., for¬

getting, deliberately, that if coolie meant anything it meant

manual labourer. To rise above the coolie level, Parsis from

India styled themselves Persians, and Moslems from India chose

to be regarded as ‘Arabs’ which they were not. A turban was

officially recognized as part of the costume of an ‘Arab’ but not

of a Hindu.

Several days after arriving, Gandhi went to court. The

magistrate ordered him to remove his turban. Gandhi demurred

and left the court. To obviate further trouble, he decided to

wear an English hat. No, said Dada Abdulla Sheth, a hat on a

coloured man is the symbol of a waiter.

The lawsuit required Gandhi’s presence in Pretoria, the capital

of Transvaal. First class accommodations were purchased for him

at Durban where he boarded the train for the overnight journey.

At Maritzburg, the capital of Natal, a white man entered the

compartment, eyed the brown intruder, and withdrew to reappear

in a few moments with two railway officials who told Gandhi

to transfer to third class. Gandhi protested that he held a first

class ticket. That didn’t matter; he had to leave. He stayed. So

they fetched a policeman who took him off with his luggage.

Gandhi could have returned to the train and found a place in

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the third class car. But he chose to remain in the station waiting

room. It was cold in the mountains. His overcoat was in his

luggage which the railway people were holding; afraid to be

insulted again, he did not ask for it. All night long, he sat and

shivered, and brooded.

Should he return to India? This episode reflected a much larger

situation. Should he address himself to it or merely seek redress

of his personal grievance, finish the case, and go home to India?

He had encountered the dread disease of colour prejudice. It

was his duty to combat it. To flee, leaving his countrymen in

their predicament, would be cowardice. The frail lawyer began

to see himself in the role of a David assailing the Goliath of racial

discrimination.

Many years later, in India, Dr. John R. Mott, a Christian

missionary, asked Gandhi, c What have been the most creative

experiences in your life?’ In reply, Gandhi told the story of the

night in the Maritzburg station.

Why, of all people, did it occur to Gandhi to resist the evil?

The next morning Indians he met recounted similar experiences.

They made the best of conditions; ‘You cannot strike your head

against a stone wall.’ But Gandhi intended to test its hardness.

His father and grandfather had defied authority. His own meagre

contacts with it in India were unhappy. He had rejected the

authoritative, time-and-tradition-honoured version of the Bhaga-

vad Gita for his own. Was it this inherent anti-authoritarianism

that made him rebel against the government colour line? Was he

more sensitive, resentful, unfettered and ambitious because his

life, so far, had been a failure? Did he aspire to be strong morally

because he was weak physically? Did challenging immoral prac¬

tices in an uncrowded arena present greater opportunities for

service than the pursuit of personal gain in crowded courts? Was

it destiny, heritage, luck, the Gita , or some other immeasurable

quantity?

That bitter night at Maritzburg the germ of social protest was

born in Gandhi. But he did nothing. He proceeded on his busi¬

ness to Pretoria.

The Charlesto\vn-to-Johannesburg lap was negotiated by stage

coach. There were three seats on the cqach box, usually occupied

by the driver and the ‘leader’ of the. trip. On this occasion, the

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‘leader’ sat inside and told Gandhi to ride with the driver and a

Hottentot. There was space for Gandhi inside, but he did not

want to make a fuss and miss the coach, so he mounted to the

driver’s perch. Later, however, the deader’ decided he wanted

to smoke and get some air; he spread a piece of dirty sacking at

the driver’s feet on the footboard and instructed Gandhi to sit

on it. Gandhi complained; why could he not go inside? At this,

the deader’ began to curse and tried to drag him off the coach.

Gandhi clung to the brass rail though he felt that his wrists would

break. But he did not relax his hold. The deader’ continued

alternately to pummel and pull him until the white passengers

intervened: ‘Don’t beat him,’ they shouted. ‘He is not to blame.

He is right.’ The deader’, yielding to the customers, relented, and

Gandhi entered the coach.

The next day, Gandhi wrote to the coach company and received

a written assurance that he would not be molested again.

In Johannesburg, Gandhi went to an hotel, but failed to get a

room. Indians laughed at his naivety. ‘This country is not for

men like you,’ a rich Indian merchant said to him. ‘For making

money we do not mind pocketing insults, and here we are.’ The

same person advised Gandhi to travel third class to Pretoria

because conditions in the Transvaal were much worse than in

Natal. But Gandhi was obdurate. He ordered the railway regu¬

lations to be brought to him, read them, and found that the prohi¬

bition was not precise. He therefore penned a note to the station

master stating that he was a barrister and always travelled first (it

was his ninth day and first journey in South Africa) and would

soon apply in person for a ticket.

The station master proved sympathetic. He sold Gandhi the

ticket on condition that he would not sue the company if the

guards or the passengers ejected him. The collector came to

examine the tickets and held up three fingers. Gandhi vehemently

refused to move to third class. The sole other passenger, an

Englishman, scolded the guard and invited Gandhi to make

himself comfortable.

‘If you want to travel with a coolie, what do I care,’ the guard

grumbled.

At the station in Pretoria, Gandhi asked a railway official about

hotels, but got no helpful information. An American Negro, who

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overheard the conversation, offered to take Gandhi to an inn

run by an American: Johnston’s Family Hotel. Mr. Johnston

cheerfully accommodated him but suggested, with apologies, that

since all the other guests were white, he take dinner in his room.

Waiting for his food, Gandhi pondered the adventures he had

had on this strange trip. Not everybody was prejudiced; some

whites felt uncomfortable about it all. Presently Mr. Johnston

knocked and said, ‘I was ashamed of having asked you to take

your dinner here, so I spoke to the other guests about you, and

asked them if they would mind your having dinner in the dining¬

room. They said they had no objection, and they did not mind

your staying here as long as you liked.’ Gandhi enjoyed the meal

downstairs. But lodgings in a private home were cheaper than

Mr. Johnston’s hotel.

Within a week of his arrival Gandhi summoned all the Indians

in Pretoria to a meeting. He wanted ‘to present to them a picture

of their condition’. He was twenty-four. This was his first public

speech. The audience consisted of Moslem merchants interspersed

with a few Hindus. He urged four things: Tell the truth even in

business; Adopt more sanitary habits; Forget caste and religious

divisions; Learn English. A barber, a clerk and a shopkeeper

accepted his offer of English lessons. The barber merely wished

to acquire the vocabulary of his trade. Gandhi dogged them for

months and would not let them be lazy or lax in their studies.

Other meetings followed, and soon Gandhi knew every Indian

in Pretoria. He communicated with the railway authorities and

elicited the promise that ‘properly dressed’ Indians might travel

first or second class. Though open to arbitrary interpretation,

this represented progress. Gandhi was encouraged. The Pretorian

Indians formed a permanent organization.

The lawsuit for which Gandhi came to South Africa brought

him into contact with Roman Catholics, Protestants, Quakers

and Plymouth Brethren. Some of them tried to convert him to

Christianity. Gandhi did not discourage their efforts. He pro¬

mised that if the inner voice commanded it he would embrace

the Christian faith. He read the books they gave him and tried

to answer their searching questions about Indian religions. When

he did not know the answers he wrote to friends in England and

to Raychandbai, the jeweller-poet of Bombay.

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Once Michael Coates, a Quaker, urged Gandhi to discard the

beads which, as a member of the Hindu Vaishnava sect, he always

wore around his neck.

‘This superstition does not become you,’ Coates exclaimed.

‘Come, let me break the necklace.’

‘No, you will not,’ Gandhi protested. ‘It is a sacred gift from

my mother.’

‘But do you believe in it?’ Coates questioned.

‘I do not know its mysterious significance,’ Gandhi said, de¬

fensively. ‘T do not think I should come to harm if I did not

wear it. But I cannot, without sufficient reason, give up a necklace

which she put round my neck out of love and in the conviction

that it would be conducive to my welfare. When, with the passage

of time, it wears away, and breaks of its own accord, I shall have

no reason to get a new one. But this necklace cannot be broken.’

Later in life he did not wear beads.

Gandhi’s Christian friends taught him the essence of Chris¬

tianity. They said if he believed in Jesus he would find redemption.

‘I do not seek redemption from the consequences of sin,’ Gandhi

replied. ‘I seek to be redeemed from sin itself.’ They said that

was impossible. Nor could Gandhi understand why, if God had

one son, He could not have another. Why could he go to Heaven

and attain salvation only as a Christian? Did Christianity have a

monopoly of Heaven? Was God a Christian? Did He have

prejudices against non-Christians?

Gandhi liked the sweet Christian hymns and many of the

Christians he met. But he could not regard Christianity as the

perfect religion or the greatest religion. ‘From the point of view

of sacrifice, it seemed to me that the Hindus greatly surpassed the

Christians.’ And Raychandbai assured him that Hinduism was

unexcelled in subtlety and profundity. On the other hand,

Gandhi doubted whether the sacred Hindu Vedas were the only

inspired word of God. ‘Why not also the Bible and the Koran ?’

He recoiled from the competitiveness of religions.

He also disliked the competitiveness of lawyers. His client,

Dada Abdulla Sheth, and the opposing party, Tyeb Sheth, were

relatives, and the cost of the litigation, dragging out for more than

a year, was ruining both. Gandhi suggested a compromise out

of court. Finally, the plaintiff and defendant agreed on an

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arbitrator who heard the case and decided in favour of Dada

Abdulla. Now a new problem confronted Gandhi. Tyeb was

called upon to pay thirty-seven thousand pounds and costs. This

threatened him with bankruptcy. Gandhi induced Dada Abdulla

to permit the loser to pay in instalments stretched over a very

extended period.

In preparing the case, Gandhi learned the secrets of bookkeep¬

ing and some of the fine points of law. Above all, it reinforced his

opinion that settlements out of court were preferable to trials. He

followed this practice during his twenty years as a lawyer: T lost

nothing thereby — not even money, certainly not my soul.’

The lawsuit settled, Gandhi returned to Durban and prepared

to sail for India. He had been in South Africa almost twelve

months. Before his departure, his associates gave him a farewell

party. During the festivities someone handed him the day’s Natal

Mercury , and in it he found a brief item regarding the Natal govern¬

ment’s proposed bill to deprive Indians of their right to elect

members of the legislature. Gandhi stressed the necessity of

resisting this move. His friends were ready but they were ‘un¬

lettered, lame’ men, they said, and powerless without him. He

consented to stay a month. He remained twenty years fighting

the battle for Indian rights. He won.

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